United Nations

Press Release

Department of Public Information • News Coverage Service • New York

Prepared by Central News

DH/904
5 June 1991

WEDNESDAY HIGHLIGHTS

- Secretary-General concludes four-day stay in Abuja for OAU summit; talks to press about Ethiopia, Lebanon and Western Sahara before leaving for official visit to Sierra Leone.

- Special Committee investigating Israeli practices in occupied territories concludes field mission to Middle East.

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Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar wound up his four-day stay in Abuja, Nigeria, today, after attending the twenty-seventh Organization of African Unity (OAU) summit and meeting with several Heads of State and Government and other dignitaries. He left early in the afternoon for Freetown on a two-day official visit to Sierra Leone.

Before leaving Nigeria, the Secretary-General met with the Foreign Minister of Mauritania, Hasni Ould Didi, with whom he discussed African regional questions, in particular the question of Western Sahara, and the Secretary-General briefed him on the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

The Secretary-General also met with the Prime Minister of Somalia, Mohamed Hawadle Madar, and discussed with him the humanitarian relief effort in that country and the refugee situation.

During a meeting with the President of Nigeria, Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida, the Secretary-General discussed with him the OAU summit and issues of mutual interest to the United Nations and the OAU, including the question of Western Sahara.

At a meeting with President Sam Nujoma of Namibia, the Secretary-General reviewed with him the role of the United Nations in Namibia, the economic situation of the country and developments in South Africa.

Speaking to the press before leaving Abuja today, the Secretary-General was asked about the aggravation of the situation in Ethiopia and whether he

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was willing to mediate in the conflict. The Secretary-General said that, on the humanitarian level, he was very concerned for the civilian population in Ethiopia and noted that he had just launched an appeal to help in a coordinated and efficient way to alleviate the suffering of the Ethiopian people and to assist neighbouring countries, namely, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia and the Sudan. He added that when in Geneva next week, he would coordinate, at a high level, with United Nations agencies and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and send a mission to the region.

On the political level, the Secretary-General noted that he had not been in touch, while in Abuja, with the Eritreans; he had only met with an official of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. At any rate, he said, any involvement of the United Nations would require authorization from the General Assembly or the Security Council.

Regarding the situation in Lebanon, the Secretary-General said he had yesterday made a statement deploring the violation of the territorial integrity of Lebanon and expressing his concern and regret at the attacks. He had also immediately contacted his advisers in New York and was told that the Lebanese Government had asked for an urgent meeting of the Security Council. He sincerely hoped, said the Secretary-General, that the situation would calm down and that no further attacks occurred in southern Lebanon.

Asked about the Western Sahara referendum, the Secretary-General said the United Nations had embarked on the task of identification of the Saharan people. "I have appointed a very distinguished African", he said, "Macaire Pedanou, to carry out that task. I have also appointed Armand Roy, a Canadian, to head the force".

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The Special Committee to Investigate Israeli Practices Affecting the Human Rights of the Palestinian People and Other Arabs of the Occupied Territories today concluded its two-week field mission to Damascus, Amman and Cairo.

Established by the General Assembly in December 1968, the Special Committee is mandated to investigate Israeli practices and to report back through the Secretary-General to the Assembly. It has been denied access by Israel to the territories and relies therefore on Israeli press reports and on oral evidence by persons who have first-hand knowledge of the situation in those territories.

During its fact-finding mission, the Special Committee heard some 40 witnesses with first-hand experience about the situation in the occupied Syrian Arab Golan, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. All the witnesses interviewed testified that the human rights situation in the occupied territories, already critical since the beginning of the uprising and its repression, had further deteriorated in recent months. The outbreak of the Gulf crisis and the ensuing war was said to have led to increasingly repressive policies and practices by the occupying Power.

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The prolonged and continuous curfews imposed upon the occupied territories during the Gulf war, for periods which in certain areas extended to six weeks, had had, according to many testimonies, a dramatic impact on all aspects of life.

In addition, witnesses said, increasingly restrictive regulations for the issuance of identification cards had led to a situation in which tens of thousands of Palestinian workers were prevented from continuing their employment inside Israel. These new developments were said to considerably add to the vulnerability of a population living in a state of prolonged physical and psychological stress and already severely affected by unemployment and a disastrous economic situation. In that regard, it was said that most of the Palestinian and other Arab population in the occupied territories was living below the poverty line and merely surviving.

Another preoccupying factor mentioned by several witnesses was the new impetus given by the Israeli authorities to their annexation and settlement policy. They drew attention to the recent creation of several new settlements, in particular in the Jerusalem area, and the declared intention to establish further settlements in the near future, as well as the measures taken to facilitate the immigration to Israel and the settlement in the occupied territories of Jews from the Soviet Union and Ethiopia.

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